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C O N F I D E N T I A L VATICAN 000539

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA; NEA/RA; NEA/NGA; DRL/IRF ABRAMSON, KELLY

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TAGS: [IZ](#) [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [SOCI](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ: PATRIARCH CONCERNED ABOUT CONSTITUTION, CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Ambassador Meets Patriarch

[¶](#)1. (C) Ambassador met November 15 with Emmanuel III Delly (protect), Patriarch of Babylon and head of the Chaldean Catholic Church. The Chaldeans claim some 1.3 million members in Iraq and elsewhere. Delly was in Rome to see Pope Benedict XVI and for a meeting of Chaldean bishops.

Concern about Constitution

[¶](#)2. (C) Delly, who travels often and speaks frequently on issues concerning the Chaldean Church, reiterated his concern about language (barring any law which contradicts the tenets of Islam) in the Iraqi constitution. He said the relevant section could be interpreted in ways detrimental to members of other religions and Christians in particular. Delly suggested that the language be amended to apply specifically to Muslims, and not to those of other faiths.

Patriarch: Future of Christianity in Peril

[¶](#)3. (C) The Patriarch, two visiting Chaldean bishops from the U.S., and Monsignor Philip Najim, the Chaldean Church's representative in Rome, expressed alarm over the future of Christianity in Iraq and were especially fearful that the country would be partitioned - whether de jure or de facto. The Patriarch repeated what he has told us before, that conditions for Christians had been better before the war. Now, he said, there was a real danger that the entire Christian community would disappear. Under Saddam, he continued, those who didn't challenge the regime were left alone, but now the level of persecution against Christians is high and rising. Delly said that he himself had received numerous threats. The Patriarch said he wanted his community to stay in Iraq, but that under the circumstances he could not tell families to remain. The group was quite animated in describing the deterioration of society in today's Iraq - insisting, for example, that Baghdad is now ridden with criminals and has the "world's best prostitutes." They also worried about the increased influence of Iran in the region, claiming that on the streets of Basra, the dominant language was now Farsi, spoken by transplanted Iranians. The Chaldeans said they were hopeful that Ayad Allawi would return to power, believing him to be the most secular politician in a position to do so.

"U.S. Forces Should Stay"

[¶](#)4. (C) The Patriarch agreed that U.S. forces should remain in Iraq for now, but said they should do more to ensure religious freedom and security. Delly and his colleagues did not offer specific suggestions in this regard, but said they found it hard to believe that the USG could not do more. Delly also expressed a desire to meet Ambassador Khalilzad. He claimed that "all other religious groups" besides the Chaldeans had already been invited to see him. (Note: Delly repeated what he has told us before: he wants contact with U.S. officials, but must be very discreet about it, due to the potential risk of insurgents seeking to portray him, and the Chaldean community, as foreign agents.)

Detained by U.S. Forces

[¶](#)5. (C) Monsignor Najim mentioned that Delly had been detained and searched by U.S. forces at a road checkpoint some time back, while in full religious garb. Apart from the personal humiliation, Delly noted that both his own community and the Muslims who witnessed the event were shocked and indignant that an important religious figure could be publicly treated in this way.

Comment

16. (C) We defer to colleagues in Baghdad and Washington as to

the situation on the ground, but wanted to pass on Delly's views. He is a frequent visitor to Rome and the Embassy, and his concerns resonate with the pope and the Vatican hierarchy. In his meeting with the pope, widely reported in Vatican-based media, Delly said that the "tragic situation" spreading across "our martyred country" had forced the Chaldean bishops to meet in Rome rather than in Iraq. Benedict XVI, for his part, offered the Chaldeans a "word of fervent encouragement." We would appreciate any guidance on Delly's desire to see Ambassador Khalilzad.

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